

Strengthening Links Between the Levels: School Counselor
Collaboration for Successful Student Transitions

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Abstract

This exploratory study focused on the inter-collaboration activities among 112 elementary, middle, and high school counselors that facilitate students' transitions. Results indicated significant differences in several of the current collaboration activities of the varying levels of school counselors; however, there were no differences found in the school counselors' beliefs about collaboration activities. Implications for student transition-related collaborative activities among school counselors are presented and implications for future research are considered.

Strengthening Links Between the Levels: School Counselor
Collaboration for Successful Transitions

"We will surely get to our destination if we join hands."

☞ *Aung San Suu Kyi*

The American School Counselor Association's *National Model for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2003) incorporates collaboration as a key element for effective delivery of developmental, comprehensive school counseling and guidance programs (CSCGPs). "Professional school counselors work collaboratively with parents or guardians, community members and other support services professionals as part of the student support services team" (ASCA, 2003, p. 16). Allen (1994) emphasized the importance of collaboration as school counselors promote student success. It is apparent that collaboration is a crucial daily activity for all school counselors as they facilitate student achievement and success.

Much of the professional school counseling literature suggests that the educational leadership role of school counselors includes collaboration with a variety of school-community stakeholders. Various school counseling professionals emphasized the need for collaborative efforts in the February 2007 special issue of *Professional School Counseling* that focused on student transitions. The need for collaboration is especially relevant at student academic transition points (Akos, Shoffner, & Ellis, 2007; Constantine, Kindaichi & Miville, 2007; Sink, Edwards, & Weir, 2007). Although our professional literature has provided an understanding of the need for school counselors' collaboration during students' transitions in K-12 schools, that body of literature has provided scant evidence of the nature and effectiveness of school counselor-to-school

counselor collaborative efforts at all levels to facilitate successful student transitions. The current study represents an effort to address this gap in professional knowledge.

The Nature of Collaboration

In describing the nature of collaboration, Allen (1994) purported:

Collaboration is the process whereby two individuals or groups work together for a common goal, a mutual benefit, or a desired outcome. Trust, respect, openness, active listening, clear communication, and risk taking are fundamental requirements for collaborative efforts. In order for collaboration to happen, participants must share a common vision and agree on a common mission. The motivation for a common mission may be the need to identify or solve a problem, to focus on the issues, or to achieve consensus. Initiating and maintaining collaborative efforts is an appropriate role of the school counselor in educational reform (www.ericdigests.org/1995-2/success.htm).

Friend and Cook (1996) explained interpersonal collaboration as “a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 6). Lawson (2003) further summarized necessary components for successful collaboration among educational professionals including activities most school counselors practice daily: connecting, communicating, cooperating, coordinating, community building, and contracting.

Collaboration in the Schools

Professional school counselor collaboration in K-12 schools can generally be defined as interactive processes in which school counselors engage that focus on educating and serving students. Despite the lack of empirical evidence regarding

collaboration among school counselors, suggestions regarding their collaborative practices exist throughout our literature. Past researchers reported on the use of school professionals' collaboration to impact student achievement (Brabeck, Walsh, & Latta, 2003) and highlighted collaboration among individuals in schools, universities, professional organizations, and state departments of education to impact school counseling practices (Miller, 2006). Further, Myers (2005) documented that through collaboration with other school professionals, school counselors increased their skills in working with students with disabilities and better equipped themselves to identify resources to meet these students' needs. Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, and Vandiver (2004) described a systematic collaboration approach to strengthen working relationships with administrators, teachers, and families.

Other researchers offered suggestions regarding the training of school counselors in collaborative efforts. Clark and Horton-Parker (2002) described pre-service training of school counselors in collaborative skills during student internships while Shoffner and Briggs (2001) developed an interactive CD to train pre-service school counselors in effective collaboration with parents and other school personnel. They suggested a reexamination of the preparation process of all school personnel with inclusion of more collaborative strategies for professional working relationships. In addition, Bemak (2000) described the transformed school counselor's role as educational leader and he identified the lack of effective school counselor collaboration with other school personnel, communities, and families. He recommended the training should incorporate interdisciplinary collaborative projects. Although no strategic collaboration training exists for school counselors to our knowledge, among educational

stakeholders, school counselors are increasingly acting as collaborators and team members while providing culturally sensitive guidance services to all students (Keys, Green, Lockhart, & Luongo, 2003; Reschly, 2000).

Santos de Barona and Barona (2006) and Simcox, Nuijens, and Lee (2006) emphasized the need for collaboration between school counselors and school psychologists to ensure that minority students receive appropriate educational services. Santos de Barona and Barona (2006) also noted that by 2050, half of the United States population will consist of racial/ethnic minorities. By 2003, 42% of our public school students were considered ethnic or racial minorities (Livingston & Wirt, 2005 as cited in Santos de Barona & Barona, 2006). They stressed that educational professionals give appropriate consideration of culturally and linguistically diverse students for special education programs.

Lee (2001) presented a model for culturally competent schools that provided four primary levels of service: work with students, services for parents and families, interventions with educators, and community involvement. In addition to the collaborative relationships between school counselors and school psychologists emphasized in this article, this model also can be applied to school counselors' working relationships with other educational professionals, including other school counselors at varying levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). It is imperative for school counselors at all levels to work collaboratively to empower all students academically, socially, psychologically, and in career planning (ASCA, 2003). Through effective collaboration, school counselors are uniquely positioned to develop strong, positive,

culturally-sensitive relationships among the various members of K-12 learning communities.

Collaborative Learning Communities and Successful Student Transitions

Effective learning communities not only require strong, positive relationships among community members, they also require regular collaboration in the interest of students' academic achievement, wellness, and educational and personal transitions (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006). For school counselors, collaboration is essential to the mission of results-based CSCGPs; collaboration is critical in the roles counselors play in students' transitions into their schools and as students exit from their schools (ASCA, 2003; DeVoss & Andrews; Porter, Epp, & Bryant, 2000). Johnson and Johnson (2003) described results-based guidance as a systems approach to school counseling in which counselors work as members of teams to address students' needs. West and Idol (1993) proposed that collaborative schools promote school improvement efforts; they stated that educational collaboration is a process that includes interactive planning, decision-making, and/or problem solving.

School counselors serve as relationship and team builders in K-12 schools. They work with teachers, administrators, teachers, librarians, students, parents, family members, and the community in service to a school's educational and social missions. School counselors are the school leaders specially trained in skills for developing strong and positive relationships through which schools can establish collaborative learning communities that promote socially just student achievement and successful student growth and transitions (ASCA, 2003, DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Ed. Trust, 2002; Harris 2004, 2005).

Davis and Lambie (2005) proposed a collaborative, systemic approach for middle school counselors as they engage with other school counselors and families and facilitate student transitions. Their approach involves school counselors' collaboration with other school professionals as a means for supporting family involvement with their middle school students. Moreover, despite the existence of school programs in many elementary and middle schools, there are still opportunities to strengthen the student transition process (Davis & Lambie; Rotchford, 2002). The transition process to middle school offers counselors at the elementary and middle school levels opportunities to collaborate, and Davis and Lambie suggested that counselors at both of these levels organize transition-related events such as a barbeque outside of the normal school day for students and their parents or guardians. Furthermore, school counselors could help families understand students' transitions from elementary to middle school in the framework of family life-cycle transitions (Davis & Lambie). These events would focus on providing information not only for students but for their families.

Dimmitt and Carey (2007) utilized the four components of the ASCA *National Model* (2003) and the Education Trust's (2002) themes for transformed school counseling as a framework for examining school counselors' facilitation of student transitions. They incorporated Akos' (2003) work which described an ideal delivery system utilizing evidence-based practice for transition planning that is implemented throughout a school year. Akos maintained that for effective student transition services, school districts should have transition teams composed of school counselors, teachers, parents, and administrators. Dimmitt and Carey described strategies that school counselors at the elementary and middle school levels could utilize as they collaborate

to facilitate successful student transitions. An important component of such collaboration is communication by the elementary counselors with the middle school counselors at planned events that impact the transitioning students, such as elementary school students' planned visits to their new middle schools.

Akos, Shoffner, and Ellis (2007) suggested that school counselors proactively assist students and their parents with transitions. They recommended several specific school counselor actions to impact individualized educational planning such as counselors providing information to help parents become better advocates for their children. Additionally, the authors suggested that school counselors can explain curriculum choices and implications to students and parents while assisting with scheduling and can assist teachers and students in improving their interactions. Furthermore, they suggested that school counselors help the entire school community to examine recognized and unrecognized biases that may create barriers to students' access to challenging quality educational opportunities. Overall, it appears that school counselors are uniquely positioned to promote successful transitions from one school level to the next with ongoing systematic efforts to support students.

There is much to be gained from school counselor-to-counselor collaboration in promoting collaborative learning communities and successful student transitions. Such efforts maximize the use of limited school resources and avoid duplication of services. In addition, collaboration by counselors at different levels provides an opportunity for school counselors to be visible partners in fostering student success. In reflecting on the above-cited literature, the authors recognized that no previous empirical studies focused on the actual collaboration practices among school counselors at varying levels,

including their beliefs about their current collaborative relationships with other school counselors. Therefore, the authors designed this exploratory study to examine the current counselor-to-counselor collaboration activities of school counselors focused on aiding students in their academic and personal transitions.

Purpose of the Study

The authors constructed an exploratory study based on the call for professional school counselors to be collaborators in a variety of settings with various school-community stakeholders (ASCA, 2003); the ever-increasing number of current work activities school counselors complete (Bemak, 2000; Coll & Freeman, 1997; Dixon Rayle, 2006); and the lack of knowledge regarding school counselor-to-school counselor collaborative involvement for student transitions across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The authors hoped to address the paucity in knowledge and in professional literature regarding the collaborative activities for student-transition programs in which elementary, middle, and high school counselors are currently involved and to identify which collaborative activities they believe have the highest priority. Two exploratory research questions were addressed in this study: 1) In what ways do elementary, middle, and high school counselors differ in their current collaboration activities in relation to student transitions?, and 2) Do elementary, middle, and high school counselors differ in their beliefs about their current collaboration activities with other school counselors and in the priority levels they assign to reported collaboration activities in relation to student transitions?

Method

Participants

Potential participants for this study initially were contacted via their ASCA state chapters' email listservs and various other school counseling email listservs as well as in person at an annual state school counselors' conference. The researchers emailed a total of 65 informational group email messages from an email account established especially for this study in order to solicit potential participants. The final sample consisted of 112 school counselor participants including 44 elementary, 25 middle, and 43 high school counselors. In addition, the sample included 89 females (79.5%) and 23 males (20.5%) ranging in years of school counseling experience from 1 to 10 or more; the mean number of years of school counseling experience was $M = 2.71$ ($SD = 1.40$).

Respondents fell between the ages of 22 to 56 with the largest population in the age range of 50-55 ($n = 22$, 20%). In addition, participants worked in all three main levels of school settings including elementary ($n = 44$, 39.3%), middle ($n = 25$, 22.3%), and high schools ($n = 43$, 38.4%). The elementary school counselor group consisted of 5 males (11.4%) and 39 females (88.6%), the middle school group consisted of 7 males (28%) and 18 females (72%), and the high school group consisted of 11 males (25.6%) and 32 females (74.4%). Over 99% (99.1%, $n = 111$) of school counselors in the survey held master's degrees with one participant holding a doctoral degree. Almost two thirds ($n = 73$, 65.2%) received their counseling training from an institution accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

A high percentage of the respondents reported having been teachers *prior* to becoming school counselors ($n = 73$, 65.2%). Most of the participants reported being

state certified school counselors ($n = 108$, 96.4%); however, only 14.3 % ($n = 16$) reported being licensed professional counselors. More than half of participants reported being members of the ASCA ($n = 61$, 54.5%); and 88 participants reported membership in their respective ASCA-based state associations (78.6%). Although 103 counselors (92%) reported currently running a Comprehensive School Counseling and Guidance Program (CSCGP) based on the *ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2003), only 78 participants (70%) reported actually being trained in the *ASCA National Model*.

Instrumentation

An extensive demographic questionnaire and one additional instrument were used to collect data regarding the proposed research questions. Because no current instrumentation exists focusing on collaborative efforts among elementary and middle, and middle and high school counselors, the authors created the *Collaboration among School Counselors Survey* (CSCS). The CSCS was created for this study to investigate school counselors' current collaborative activities as well as how they would prioritize (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being *low* priority and 10 being *high* priority) 12 possible school counselor-to-school counselor collaborative activities drawn from the professional school counseling literature. The CSCS was approved through the two main authors' university IRB Human Subjects Review Boards.

Demographic Form. Participants completed an extensive demographic data form used to gather specific information about the respondents including the following items: gender, age, race/ethnicity, level of educational training, accreditation training, years as a school counselor, time spent in current position, school setting, licenses and

certifications, professional organizations membership, teaching experience, current daily work activities, and current collaboration activities, as well as a variety of additional information questions.

Collaboration among School Counselors Survey (CSCS). The CSCS items surveying school counselors' beliefs about their collaboration activities were generated from a review of the current collaboration in school counseling literature (ASCA, 2003). The CSCS consisted of one item in which participants were asked to identify which specific collaborative activities they were currently participating in and one item that allowed school counselors to priority-rank a list of collaboration activities for student transitions that school counselors engage in to explore what activities the participants deemed as most important. In addition, the CSCS allowed school counselors to include qualitative comments concerning their school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration activities or lack thereof.

Finally, the authors constructed five items to measure the participants' assessment of the quality of their own collaborative efforts with school counselors at other levels. For these five items, participants responded on a ten-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not At All to 10 = Very Well, and the total beliefs about current collaboration activities score was reached by computing the mean of item responses. Sample items included "How well do you feel you collaborate with the other school counselors at the schools your students attended or will attend?"; "How well do you feel the school counselors at the other schools collaborate with you and your program?"; and "How much do you value collaborative relationships with the other school counselors at the schools your students attended or will attend?"

Regarding the internal consistency of the CSCS, the Cronbach's alpha for the total sample assessing their own collaborative activities items was .88. Additional corresponding alpha coefficients were .88 for the elementary school counselors, .79 for the middle school counselors, and .92 for the high school counselors respectively.

Procedure

A four-step procedure was used in this study's survey process. The first step included emailing 65 informational group email messages from an email account established especially for this study. These mass emails went out to potential participants' ASCA state chapters' email listservs and various other school counseling email listservs. The initial email included a pre-letter briefly describing the study and inviting prospective respondents to participate in the study. Second, the survey packet including a cover letter, the demographic questionnaire, and the survey instrument was emailed to those who agreed to participate. Third, a follow-up email reminder was sent two weeks later. Finally, all materials were printed and coded as they were received from participants. Email messages and email addresses were destroyed and all responses were kept confidential.

Results

In order to investigate the first exploratory research question regarding possible differences in school counselors' current collaboration activities in relation to their students' transitions, the authors conducted one-way between-groups ANOVA analyses to make comparisons of the responses among the varying levels of school counselors. First, 81.2% of the total school counselors reported that they were facilitating a transitions program for students in their schools. Concerning the time programs had

been in place, 33.9% of the sample reported that their student transitions program had been in place for over 10 years and 19.6% percent of the sample reported their programs had been in place from 4-6 years. Results from the ANOVA analyses indicated significant differences in: sharing program materials/goals $F(2, 109) = 6.19, p = .003$, partial eta squared = .11; whether they were running a collaborative student transitions programs $F(2, 109) = 3.50, p = .03$, partial eta squared = .06; and whether they took part in joint continuing education activities $F(2, 109) = 12.30, p = .001$, partial eta squared = .19. An investigation of the mean scores indicated that elementary school counselors' ($M = .25, SD = .44$) differed significantly from middle school counselors' in regards to sharing program materials/goals with other school counselors ($M = .67, SD = .48$); and differed significantly from high school counselors in whether they took part in joint continuing education activities (elementary, $M = .02, SD = .15$; high school, $M = .40, SD = .50$). In addition, middle school counselors differed significantly from high school counselors in regards to whether they were running a collaborative student transitions program (middle school, $M = .63, SD = .50$; high school $M = .30, SD = .46$), and whether they took part in joint continuing education activities (middle school, $M = .13, SD = .34$; high school, $M = .40, SD = .50$).

Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages for the 11 possible current school counselor collaboration activities that the authors drew from the school counseling literature. Results indicated that fewer elementary school counselors were sharing materials, more high school counselors were taking part in joint continuing education activities, and more middle school counselors reported running collaborative student transitions programs.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentages of School Counselors' Self Reported Current Collaboration Activities.

Possible Collaboration Activity	Elementary Counselors (n=44)		Middle School Counselors (n=25)		High School Counselors (n=43)		Percent of Total Sample of School Counselors
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Regular Phone Calls	16	36.4	13	52.0	24	55.8	47.3
Regular In-Person Meetings	11	25.0	11	44.0	14	32.6	32.1
Regular E-Mails	22	50.0	11	44.0	23	53.5	50.0
Sharing CCBSGP Materials	11	25.0	16	64.0	18	41.9	40.2
Collaborative Transitions Program	21	47.7	15	60.0	12	27.9	
School Counselor-Facilitated School-to-School Visits	26	59.1	19	76.0	22	51.2	59.8
Joint Continuing Education Activities	1	2.3	3	12.0	16	37.2	17.9
Collaborative Parent Nights/Meetings	11	25.0	7	28.0	16	37.2	30.4
Collaborative Student Info Sessions	11	25.0	7	28.0	13	30.2	27.7
Joint Contacts with Parents	8	18.2	6	24.0	5	11.6	17.0
Collaboration in CCBGSP Goals & Objectives	10	22.7	11	44.0	14	32.6	31.3
Regular In-Person Meetings	11	25.0	11	44.0	14	32.6	32.1

The second exploratory research question focused on possible differences among school counselors' beliefs about their current collaboration activities with other school counselors and the priority levels (1 = low, 10 = high) they assign to their current collaboration activities in relation to student transitions. Descriptive analysis results from the five items on the CSCS designed to assess participants' beliefs about their current collaboration activities revealed the following total score mean and standard deviations: elementary, $M = 7.28$, $SD = 1.76$; middle school, $M = 7.52$, $SD = 1.55$; and high school, $M = 7.27$, $SD = 1.92$. The authors then took a closer look at these overall CSCS mean scores by conducting a one-way between-groups ANOVA; however, there were no significant differences across the three levels of school counselors regarding their beliefs about their current collaboration activities.

Finally, we explored the priority levels school counselors assigned to a list of 12 possible school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration activities in relation to student transitions. Table 2 illustrates the means and standard deviations for each of the 12 activities participants ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 representing the greatest priority). Among the elementary school counselors, the collaborative activity of "Beginning Transitions Early in the School Year" resulted in the lowest ranked mean priority ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 3.12$) and "School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with New School" was ranked with the highest mean priority ($M = 8.37$, $SD = 2.19$). Among the middle school counselors, the collaborative activity of "School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with New Teachers" resulted in the lowest ranked mean priority ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 2.35$) and "Offering Realistic Portrayals of What Students should Expect" was ranked with the highest mean priority ($M = 9.25$, $SD = 1.26$). Among the high

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of School Counselor Rankings of Key Collaboration Activities (Ranked from 1-10).

Possible Collaboration Activity	Elementary Counselors (n=44)		Middle School Counselors (n=25)		High School Counselors (n=43)		Percent of Total Sample of School Counselors	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Collaboration – Parents	6.89	2.51	7.87	2.03	7.03	2.59	7.19	2.44
Beginning Transitions Early in School Year	5.27	3.12	7.05	2.01	6.00	3.15	5.96	2.96
Several Collaboration Phases for Transition	5.68	2.72	7.50	1.68	6.12	2.63	6.28	2.55
School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with New School	8.37	2.19	8.33	2.04	7.73	2.67	8.14	0.33
School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with New Teachers	6.76	2.65	6.52	2.35	6.03	2.72	6.47	2.59
Offering Realistic Portrayals of What Students should Expect	8.08	2.52	9.25	1.26	8.19	2.68	8.42	2.35
School Counselor-Facilitated Student Visits/Experiences with New School	8.35	2.45	8.92	1.32	7.79	2.37	8.30	2.21
Student-to-Student Mentoring Relationship from New School	7.28	1.92	7.22	1.98	7.48	2.21	7.33	2.02
Written Materials about New School	6.47	2.70	7.95	1.79	6.32	2.64	6.79	2.55
School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with Students at New School	6.89	2.53	6.95	2.16	7.55	2.10	7.13	2.30
School Counselor-Facilitated Student Contact with New School Counselor	8.18	2.17	8.52	1.76	6.97	2.57	7.85	2.30
School Counselor-Facilitated Teaching of Skills for Adaptation and Success	7.73	2.37	8.23	1.63	7.27	2.79	7.70	2.30

school counselors, the collaborative activity of “Beginning Transition Early in the School Year” resulted in the lowest ranked mean priority ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 3.15$) and “Offering Realistic Portrayals of What Students should Expect” was ranked with the highest mean priority ($M = 8.19$, $SD = 2.16$). Finally, within the total sample of school counselors, the collaborative activity of “Beginning Transitions Early in the School Year” resulted in the lowest ranked mean priority ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 2.96$) and “Offering Realistic Portrayals of What Students should Expect” was ranked with the highest mean priority ($M = 8.42$, $SD = 2.35$).

Follow up results from ANOVA analyses indicated significant differences in: several collaborative phases for student transitions $F(2, 109) = 3.86$, $p = .03$, partial eta squared = .13; providing written materials about the students’ new, forthcoming school $F(2, 109) = 3.25$, $p = .04$, partial eta squared = .10; and students’ contacts with their new, forthcoming school counselor $F(2, 109) = 3.98$, $p = .02$, partial eta squared = .17. An investigation of the mean scores indicated that elementary school counselors’ ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 2.72$) differed significantly from middle school counselors’ in regards to the priority level they gave to having several phases collaboration for student transitions ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 1.68$). In addition, middle school counselors differed significantly from high school counselors in regards to providing written materials about the new, forthcoming school ($M = 7.95$, $SD = 1.79$; high school $M = 6.32$, $SD = 2.64$), and valuing facilitations of students’ contacts with new, forthcoming school counselors (middle school, $M = 8.52$, $SD = 1.76$; high school, $M = 6.57$, $SD = 2.57$). Table 2 presents the complete means and standard deviations for the 12 possible current collaboration activities. Results indicated that middle school counselors gave greater priority to having several phases

for students' transitions than elementary counselors and gave greater priority to providing written materials about the new, forthcoming school. Also, middle school counselors gave higher priority in valuing facilitations of students' contacts with new, forthcoming school counselors than did high school counselors.

Discussion

As professionals continue to reform and redefine the school counseling profession, school counselors are collaborating with more individuals within their schools and communities than ever before; however, to date, no studies have highlighted school counselors' collaborative activities with one another. In order to gain knowledge on whether elementary, middle, and high school counselors were collaborating with one another, as well as what collaborative activities for student transitions they might engage in and value, the authors constructed the present exploratory study based on the call for school counselors to be collaborators in a variety of settings with various school-community stakeholders (ASCA, 2003) and the ever-increasing work activities school counselors are expected to complete (Bemak, 2000; Coll & Freeman, 1997; Dixon Rayle, 2006).

The authors also explored whether elementary, middle, and high school counselors differed significantly in their reported current collaborative activities for student transitions and in their beliefs about those collaboration activities, and whether they would value-rank possible inter-professional collaborative activities differently. Statistical analyses allowed for the exploration of proposed research questions for the total sample, and for the elementary, middle, and high school counselors independently.

Overall, our results indicated that 81.2% of the 112 school counselors surveyed reported having a transition program in place for their students. This finding concurs with past research regarding the need for and importance of having school transition programs in place for students (Akos et al., 2007; Constantine et al., 2007; Sink et al., 2007). Among those counselors who reported having transition programs in place, 33.9% of the programs had been in place for over 10 years, and 19.6% had been in place between 4-6 years. One school counselor noted about having a transition program, “As a district we have quarterly meetings for cross level teaming and meet twice a year as a K-12 team. This has helped put names with faces when speaking to other counselors, and has opened up communication among all of us.” Another noted, “Students coming to us feel more welcome and informed as to what is expected from them as well as what they will or can expect from the middle high setting now that we are collaborating more with their elementary school counselors.”

Additionally, our results indicated significant differences regarding the current collaborative activities for student transitions in which school counselors were involved. These differences were found in sharing materials and goals, running collaborative student transition programs, and partnering in joint continuing educational activities. Overall, the authors found that more high school counselors reported participating in joint continuing educational activities with other levels of school counselors as compared to elementary and middle school counselors. Because the high school counselors participated in continuing educational activities more often, they were in greater contact with other levels of school counselors through these experiences.

However, middle school counselors were found to be implementing more collaborative school transition programs. And, elementary school counselors differed significantly from middle school counselors in that they reported doing less sharing of program materials and goals with other school counselors. These findings further emphasize the need for strengthening the elementary to middle school transition process through collaborative programming (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Rotchford, 2002) as well as the importance of communication between the two levels for successful transition (Dimmitt and Carey, 2007).

Despite the fact that the authors found no significant differences among the varying levels of school counselors regarding their beliefs about their current collaboration activities, it is interesting to note the value-rankings of the lowest and highest collaboration activities among the school counselors. For example, elementary school counselors ranked “beginning transitions early in the school year” as their lowest priority and ranked “school counselor-facilitated student contact with new teachers” as their highest prioritized collaboration activity. It appears that the elementary school counselors in this study’s sample do not place as much value on beginning student transitions early in the year as the other level counselors, but definitely value of working with middle school counselors to facilitate elementary students’ contact with the new teachers they will have at their middle schools. Conversely, middle school counselors reported “school counselor-facilitated student contact with new school” as their lowest priority-ranked collaboration activity; instead, the middle school counselors reported “offering realistic portrayals of what students should expect” as their highest-priority

collaboration activity, which the authors propose to be facilitated in conjunction with the high school counselors at the school the students will be entering.

High school counselors also placed the most value on “offering realistic portrayals of what students should expect,” which is parallel with what middle school counselors value. In general, middle and high school counselors see the need and importance in offering students transitioning from middle school to high school pragmatic and concrete portrayals of what they can expect in high school and after high school. However, high school counselors priority-ranked “beginning transitions early in the school year” with the least value-emphasis, similar to elementary school counselors. This finding is contradictory to our profession’s proposed need for students’ transition planning throughout the academic year (Akos, 2003).

Ultimately, this initial exploratory study revealed significant differences in elementary, middle, and high school counselors’ current collaborative activities for students’ transition. However, no significant differences were found in the school counselors’ beliefs about their current collaboration activities. One counselor noted that despite his/her belief for the need for collaboration, “Much of what I do in this area is informal and driven by individual students’ needs. We need more school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration, but it also needs to be supported by the administration, and sometimes it is not.” The results of this study suggest that elementary, middle, and high school counselors are currently participating in differing collaboration activities for student transitions with other school counselors and place varying values on specific collaboration activities that may aid in students’ transitions. Additionally, the results suggest that it is important to emphasize that middle school counselors have a greater

weight to bear when it comes to students' transitions from school to school. They are the school counselors that specialize in receiving new elementary students into their schools and in facilitating the transition of middle school students to high schools. Finally, although many school counselors added comments concerning the improving collaborative climate, several noted that they were not receiving administrators' support which appears to play a large role in what collaboration activities are occurring despite those that might be valued.

Study results precipitated several professional questions. For example, how well are current school counselors' transition programs meeting the needs of culturally diverse students and parents/families in their transition processes? Additionally, are practicing school counselors at the various levels collaborating often and thorough enough to facilitate successful diverse student transitions? Are administrators being trained to value and support the possible benefits of school counselor collaboration in light of student transitions? Finally, we speculate whether the school counseling profession should enact standardized, culturally-responsive collaborative transition programs for all levels of students and school counselors.

Implications for School Counselors

In addition to shedding light on the research questions posed, this study stimulated the authors' insight into implications for practicing professional school counselors. The authors propose that counselors at all grade levels evaluate their current student transition programs to determine if they are meeting the needs of their culturally diverse students and parents/families. School counselors should pay particular attention to specific, at-risk populations, such as students with disabilities, English

Language Learners, racial/ethnic minority students, and lower socio-economic and poverty-level students to insure that their unique needs are being met as they experience transitions to their new schools and their transitions out of the high school environment. It is conceivable that after identifying possible unmet student/family needs, school counselors at the various grade levels can collaborate on programs that address those student/familial needs.

It is also proposed that school counselors at various grade levels work together to achieve a consensus about the priorities in student transition programs and then collaborate in planning and implementing thoughtful and worthy transition programs. These programs could possibly begin with setting goals and objectives, then developing programs and implementing them over time in phases rather than in single informational events. In addition to engaging in school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration at the varying levels, counselors can build more effective student transition programs by including other school-community stakeholders, such as parents, family members, teachers, administrators, and other students as collaborators.

Many of the school counselors in this study emphasized the importance of giving students as realistic of a perspective as possible of their next academic level. School counselors and their collaborators should keep this consideration in mind when developing student transition program components. In doing so, program developers are more likely to incorporate visits to the new school, possible student walk-throughs with simulated schedules, visits with forthcoming teachers and administrators, and mentoring by students in the forthcoming school. Most importantly, and based on the current participants' qualitative comments, the authors suggest that the more often

transitioning students have contact with current students in the forthcoming school, the more positive the overall transition.

Limitations

Although this study yields valuable information concerning a scarcely investigated area of the school counseling profession, that of school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration activities in relation to student transitions, there are limitations that must be mentioned. First, due to the limited previous research in this area, we acknowledge that we are proposing new ideas about school counselors' collaboration activities that have not been highlighted before this time. In addition, our participants included a sample size of 112 school counselors who were solicited for *voluntary* participation through the state chapters of the ASCA and through a state-based ASCA conference. In general, those individuals who choose to volunteer in research studies such as this may have biased opinions and experiences they wish to voice publicly— whether these are positive or negative. Further, generalizing the current results to other elementary, middle, and/or high school counselors across the U.S. should be done so with caution due to the variability in school counselor personal opinions and work environments/programming. Finally, the instrumentation utilized was created specifically for this study, and although there were based in school counseling theory and practice, future studies could further define the reliability and validity of these self-report measures.

Conclusion

The specialized profession of school counseling is a more demanding counseling specialty than ever before. The developing models of school counseling and the

continuing social and cultural climates in the U.S consistently present school counselors with new goals, tasks, and challenges, including collaboration with numerous individuals involved within and outside of their immediate school environments. However, this is also a most exciting time in the refinement of the school counseling profession with the creation of the ASCA (2003) *National Model for School Counseling Programs*, state-based models of school counseling, and school counseling professionals' continued definition and advocacy for the *actual* daily specialized roles of school counselors.

The results of the current exploratory study indicated that school counselors at varying levels differ in some of their current school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration activities and place varying value upon the collaboration activities they believe their students need. An important direction for future research includes investigating specific school counseling student transition programs that have been in place for numerous years. With the expectations for serving diverse student populations with growing needs, it may be that a well-conceived, diversity-sensitive, *standardized model* of school counselor-to-school counselor collaboration may be called for in today's K-12 schools. With the increasing number of daily duties assigned to school counselors and the pressure for counselors new to the field to be work ready, it may be that specific training in student transition collaborative programs is an issue that should be addressed at the university counselor education level. Future research might focus on the variability in existing collaboration activities and student transition programs, including *who* and *how* those transition programs were envisioned and created (e.g., theory behind, mission, goals, objectives, and outcomes). In addition, future research

could focus on students' and parents' needs and perceptions regarding student transition programs and processes from one school level to the next.

Some final thoughts for all school counseling professionals: the *ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs* calls for school counselors to engage in collaboration as a key element of effective delivery of developmental, comprehensive school counseling and guidance programs. However, actual collaboration activities *between* school counselors at varying levels have not been highlighted before this study. In order to effectively promote students' academic and personal transitions from one school level to another, it seems logical that school counselors must formulate collaborative student transition programs – now. It appears evident that school counselors who collaborate with their “sister” school counselors are attempting to join hands and engage in effective student academic and personal transitions in order to reach our ultimate U.S.-youth educational destinations: successful academic success and graduation.

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